A History of Oppression

The plight of the Bulgarian Pomaks

Shane Jacobs

The road south from Plovdiv into Bulgaria's Rhodope Mountains brings its travelers back into a time before the creation of Mercedes Benz and BMW. As the road twists higher into the foothills, Orthodox churches are replaced by the minarets of mosques. Modern luxury cars are replaced by outdated, smoke-spewing busses and mule carts.

Passing fields tended by women cloaked head-to-toe in multi-colored garments, you are enveloped in the transition from modern Bulgaria to the never-to-be-forgotten Ottoman centuries of the Turkish yoke. Suddenly, a strange twist confuses the transition: everyone is speaking Bulgarian-or a strange-sounding version of it-without a hint of a Turkish accent.

It comes as a surprise as you realize that the humble, hard-working inhabitants of these regions attend mosque rather than church. The *lingua franca* is Bulgarian rather than Turkish. The contradictions abound and create a piercing cognitive dissonance. They are not, in fact, Turkish, but Slavs. They are one of many remnants of the former Oriental occupiers. They are the Pomaks.

Uncertain origins

There is little more than speculation as to the origins of the Pomaks as an ethnicity. Bulgarians, Turks, and Greeks all consider them a component of their respective nations. Concentrated in the mountainous region of Thrace in the Rhodope Mountains of Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey, the Pomaks share a linguistic and religious commonality. They are generally considered Slavic-speaking Muslims.

There are numerous theories as to the origins of the term Pomak. From the Greek perspective, the term originates from the ancient Greek word *pomax* (drinker) used to describe the known Thracian tradition of drinking.

Bulgarian historians have several theories. The first theory states that Pomak is derived from the term *pomagach* (helper) in connection to an alleged collaboration with the Ottoman government in order to maintain land rights. A second theory claims that the term comes from *pomachamedanci* (Islamicized). A third theory connects the colloquial Greek term, *Achrjani*, which is often used in reference to the Pomaks.

The word can be traced back to its old Slavonic root, *aagarjani* (infidels). Yet another theory maintains that it is a corruption of the phrase *po mâka* (by pain [of death]), as Pomaks were Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Christians, who were allegedly forced to convert to Islam by the Turks during the reign of the Ottoman Empire. According to this tradition, refusal to convert meant summary execution.

The enemy within

Historically, the Pomaks have been considered undesirable or even outcasts within Bulgarian society. As several interpretations of their name suggest, they were seen as infidels and traitors to their fellow countrymen.

At the onset of the Turkish invasions (at the beginning of what Bulgarians still today refer to as the Turkish yoke), many landowners allegedly opted to accept the Islamic faith as a means to maintain ownership of their lands. It is also suggested that Pomak collaborators led the 1876 massacre in the mountain village of Batak, where nearly five thousand

people were hacked to death or burnt alive. If these reports could be proven accurate, the terms *aagarjani* and *pomagachi* (infidels and helpers) would be understandably appropriate.

Regardless of the accuracy of the latter allegation, the events at Batak proved to the turning point for the Bulgarians and the Turkish yoke (Bousfield and Richardson, 1996). Appalled by such atrocities, Western journalists and governments began to focus on the Balkans as a hot spot for human rights issues. However, when the Communist party came to power shortly after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, the Pomaks continued to bear the brunt of their countrymen's onslaughts.

Ethnic disharmony

Bulgaria's animosity toward its Muslim minorities is fueled by a different source. Five centuries of Ottoman subjugation have done nothing but create a backlash of revenge and reprisal. Also, the Communist government justified its assimilatory methods by using the ethnic unrest in neighboring Yugoslavia as a precedent. Ethnic tensions between the Serbs and Albanians spawned fears that ethnic Turks and other Muslim factions would openly rebel in the economically and geographically isolated region of the southern Rhodopes.

Many ethnic Turks found that in Turkey, though it is held to be their native culture, they are not readily accepted in mainstream Turkish society. Dialectal differences reveal them as non-natives, and they are generally regarded, as in Bulgaria, as second-class citizens. The exodus to Turkey proved yet more difficult for the Pomaks. As ethnic Bulgarians, they tend to share more cultural traits and general way of life with Bulgarian Orthodox Christians.

Linguistically, however, in many Pomak villages, the languages spoken are various dialects of Bulgarian, heavily influenced by Turkish and Greek. Furthermore, though Muslims, the majority of Bulgaria's Pomaks speak little or no Turkish beyond the words that have entered their dialects over the course of the last five centuries. Thus, even among other minority populations, they are considered second class.

The Bulgarian government itself began to deal with its intercultural dilemma in 1948, when the Communist regime unleashed a number of assimilatory measures aimed at eliminating all minority ethnicities. These included the Turks, Roma, Armenians, Tatars and Pomaks.

A fake true identity

The first wave was the *izselvane* (resettlement) program designed to relocate the Pomak population from Bulgaria's southern border regions. The second major set of measures was aimed at the assimilation of the so-called "national consciousness." In this process, the Communist government forced all Bulgarian Muslims to change their names from Arabic-Islamic names to Slavic-Christian sounding names. This process came to be known as *vâzroditelen protses* (the process of rebirth). Yulian Konstantinov explains the Communists' rationale with the following:

The nation-state had to 'explain' to the Bulgarian Muslims who they really were and help them regain their 'true' identity. The underlying proposition is that the Bulgarian Muslims have 'forgotten' about the true facts, or have been 'misled'. In official discourse they are presented as people whose 'national consciousness has to be cleared up'. The Bulgarian Muslims are seen as living in some sort of communal oblivion and ignorance and they need to be helped to get out of this state. They have to be…'born again'-a phrase that set the official label of a whole process which…came to be known as The Process of Rebirth (*vuzroditelen protses*). [1]

The Communist government, to justify its attacks on the country's minority groups, commonly used the term "national consciousness" as if the existence of the nation and its people depended on ethnic and religious homogeneity.

Rather than create a means by which to encourage intercultural tolerance between the Communist State and its Muslim minority, Bulgaria attempted to destroy its various non-conforming groups by forcing them to change their names and abandon their religious beliefs.

The government hoped that by adopting conforming names, all non-ethnic Bulgarians would both abandon their former values and beliefs as well as unconditionally embrace the Bulgarian "national consciousness" and value system. This practice extended to other non-Christian minorities, as well. In 1984, the *vâzroditelen* process was also perpetrated upon the Turks and Roma.

In June 1948, the Communists began to remove people whom they considered disloyal to the Communist regime. Members of this group were generally put in prison or into labor camps, while their families were moved inland. The second and third waves, in November 1949 and between 1950-1951, were aimed at "less dangerous" members of the Pomak population.

The eventual movement of approximately 30,000 people was, in part, done in an attempt to insure the stability of the borders between Bulgaria and its traditional and Cold War foes, Greece and Turkey. As the southern border passed through the Rhodope Mountains, it proved difficult to protect.

Also, many of the Pomaks in the villages along the border had family in Pomak villages on the Greek side. As natives of the region, crossing the border regularly (both to graze animals and to maintain contact with relatives) was relatively easy. Such practices were viewed by the Communist regime as an unacceptable threat to national security. At this point they began their campaign to remove the perceived threat from the area.

As a result of the *izselvane*, small pockets of Pomak populations can be found today in the Balkan mountain range to the north of the Rhodopes in the Lovetch-Teteven region. Pomak villages in the region include Galata, Glogovo, Gradeshnitsa, and Babintsi. They can also be found in the Veliko Tărnovo region, as well as Razgrad, Shoumen, and Rouse to the northeast.

The demographic threat

During his years as Communist Party leader, Todor Živkov did little to alleviate the cultural enmity felt toward Bulgaria's Muslims. Following his ascension to power in 1956, Živkov made several passionate speeches summoning the nation to improve on the conditions of the country's Turkish language schools and to widen minority cultural activities. However, this appears to have been merely a façade to bolster Bulgaria's image as an 'enlightened' nation.

By the late sixties, the Muslim birth rate rose sharply in comparison to that of the Bulgarians. Anxieties about a dramatic demographic shift ignited dormant trepidation toward the country's minorities. The demographic shift in question continued in this direction even into the eighties.

By 1984, the birth rate among the Muslim minorities was at 2.5 percent compared to the zero annual birth rate of the Bulgarians (Bousfield and Ricardson, 1996). [2] Another motivating factor for the forced assimilation was the rising Albanian population in present day Kosovo. Ethnic conflicts in the mid-eighties between Kosovar Muslims and Serb

Orthodox Christians fueled fears that Bulgarian Muslims would also have pretensions for autonomy in the southeastern corner of the country.

Within this historical context began the name changing campaign of the Pomaks in the mid seventies and eighties. Failure to accept the Slavicized version of their Arabic names, Pomaks, Turks and Roma were either killed outright, sent to forced labor camps such as Belene on the Danube or deported. David Kaplan recounts one victim's tale:

It usually happened in the middle of the night. The rumble of army half-tracks and the blinding glare of searchlights would disturb the sleep of an ethnic Turkish village. Militiamen would then burst into every home and thrust a photocopied form in front of the man of the house, in which he was to write the new Bulgarian names of every member of his family. Those who refused or hesitated watched as their wives or daughters were raped by the militiamen. According to Amnesty International and Western diplomats, the militiamen beat up thousands and executed hundreds. Thousands more were imprisoned or driven into internal exile. [3]

Between ideals and reality

Živkov's hard-line methods of resolving Bulgaria's ethnic dilemma nearly cast the country into anarchy and pandemonium. In and around the southern capital of Kardjali, where Muslim populations greatly outnumber Bulgarian Orthodox Christians, Turks and Pomaks alike protested the government's transgressions. Armed forces were deployed from Sofia to maintain peace in the region.

International attention to the injustices perpetrated on the country's Muslim minority resulted in Turkey opening its borders as an offer of asylum. Reports from the Turkish government state that, from May to August of 1989 alone, some 300,000 ethnic Turks crossed into Turkey. Unable to support the unexpected influx of people, however, Turkey eventually closed its borders in order to maintain the stability of its own infrastructure.

Since the closing of the border with Bulgaria, population movement in the area has become increasingly difficult. Despite this limited movement, is said that there are currently over one million Bulgarian Muslims living on Turkish soil.

Shane Jacobs, 28 May 2001

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1. Konstantinov, Yulian, 1997. *Three Pomak Stories*. Sofia: Bulgarian Society for Regional Cultural Studies website. [back to text]

2. Kaplan, Robert D, 1994. *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History*. Vintage Books (a division of Random House, New York), pp. 214-215 [back to text]

3. Bousfield, Jonathan & Dan Richardson, 1996. Bulgaria: The Rough Guide. London: Penguin Groups. [back to text]

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